

FINAL REPORT

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OREGON COUNCIL FOR THE HUMANITIES



ALTERNATIVE MODELS OF ART AND ARTISTIC IDENTITY

Abstracted from the Cabécar Culture of Central America

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1) How and where the research was conducted: In keeping with the original proposal, though slightly expanded in scope, I spent 10 weeks during the summer of 1996 interviewing, taping and observing Cabécar and other indigenous people of Costa Rica, specifically in the villages of Paso Marcos along the river Pacuare in the high Talamanca Mountains of central Costa Rica, and in Limoncito and Villapalacios in southern Costa Rica near the Panamanian border. I am still in the process of writing about the wider issue of how such a study can be seen in the context of mainstream art theory. The field work dealt with several indigenous art forms, concentrating on Cabécar and Bribri balsa canes with drawn imagery used in healing practices, and painted bark cloth of the Guaymí tribe. The individuals interviewed and observed included Cabécar and Bribri shamans (*awápa*) Rafael Luna and Federico Reyes, and six women Guaymí bark painting artists. A great deal of research material was gathered, including video interviews, actual artifacts and drawings, which has led to several domestic and international invitations to curate ethnographic exhibitions of the Mills-Acevedo Collection (detailed below), and to lecture on related topics.

The study attended to cultural attitudes about art per se, and the social role of artists for comparisons with contemporary Western postmodern art praxis and theory. The comparison dealt with relatively unacculturated indigenous object-making (the Cabécar *ulú*), with one undergoing rapid acculturation as collectible art; (*mastate* Guaymí bark cloth painting).



● Cabécar awá (shaman) Rafael Luna teaching about mythological imagery associated with healing.

2) Major Conclusions: (All references to indigenous cultures below refer to those with which I have worked: the Boruca, Guaymí, Terraba, Cabécar, Maleku and Bribri.)

Approaching indigenous art, music and ritual from a purely aesthetic point of view risks applying irrelevant or misleading contemporary Western ideological expectations concerning the nature of indigenous art and the metaphysical and social role of the creator. It is basic to responsible ethnography and axiomatic to the work of the author that artistic cultural manifestations be understood in their full social-cultural context, to the extent that such may be articulated by an outsider.

Just as many indigenous people are seeking entrance to Western consumer society through their newly converted art, postmodern polemical discussions question the legitimacy of rabid commodification, and increasingly mourn the loss of the enchantment the mainstream art world systems (critical and mercantile) has brought--which is, ironically, the same enchantment the indigenous people are giving up to participate in the wider social realm, including the so-called art world.

Almost universally, the tension between what outsiders and the indigenous people think of as art objects cultural commodities and the highly integrated traditional object making, is straining the very existence of traditional indigenous cultures. Few tribes can resist potential income from converting traditional crafts into collectible art, or the lure of the wider consumer society. The various tribes with which I have worked during the last 12 years are in various stages of having realized that their cultural traditions contain art forms tourists and collectors are willing to pay for, albeit in bastardized form. Virtually none of the tribes realize how much they are selling and at what cost to their survival. Westerners, such as myself, are in no position to pontificate about the virtue of tribal purity. (Contrast Guaymí and Cabécar)

Few indigenous art forms remain in Central America which have not been converted into collectibles. In Costa Rica, the Cabecar and Bribri ulú balsa healing cane is one of the last. Its status as a healing tool, an art object, and as a repository of cosmological and mythological iconography make it especially valuable to ethnographic and art theoretical research.

Anthropologists and other researchers unwittingly contribute to and speed-up the process of acculturation by the form of their questions and the attention given to

certain material. This is tricky, and few researchers want to deal with it publically. Still, the issue must be addressed.

Once converted into a commodity, tribal art forms are never the same. The original cultural value is very quickly distorted or sacrificed as commodification is introduced. There seems to be no going back, as the new status of art object supplants the original ritual, symbolic or sacred use such object-making once had. Iconography originally employed by the shaman in a sacred context, or face painting markings which formerly had special and specific meaning, for example, becomes just another element in the work of newly self-appointed indigenous artist making things for outside collectors. We have seen this in many groups, the most dramatic being the Guaymí community of Villapalacios, which only recently discovered painted bark cloth cut into rectangles were considered by outsiders to be framable art objects. The Guaymí, anxious to develop another home-grown trade commodity, promptly began to produce in great quantities, thereby increasing the rate of local deforestation! (Examples from the Boruca, Guaymí, Maleku tribes.)

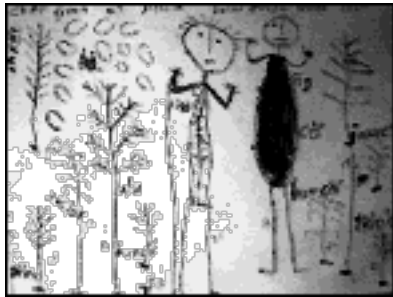
Economic pressures accelerate artistic acculturation, sometimes beyond the ability of the tribe to actually find a market for the newly produced art objects, which in turn produces disillusionment as the work of certain individuals are felt by outsiders to be of special value. This shift from collective work to the rewards of individualism distort tribal life. (Guaymí)

Western notions of art are disseminated through contact with outsiders as well as through the indigenous people becoming more sophisticated producers and marketers of their art. (Specific examples from the Boruca, Guaymí and Maleku tribes.)

New Western cultural values, including the importance and role of art, replace the lost traditional values, with seemingly little protest or sense of cultural loss on the part of the indigenous people themselves. Curiously, outsiders are often more interested in the authenticity of the object-making than the indigenous people. Few outsiders appreciate that the mere fact of their interest in collecting distorts the original art of frail economically disadvantaged peoples. Such art objects many times were not originally collectible at all, but rather were practical ritual accoutrements. (Examples from the Guaymí, Cabécar and Boruca tribes.)

Successful commodification creates new social roles as certain individuals or groups of individuals succeed in selling their work. Such indigenous people are frequently relieved of their former work lives as their economic success allows them to devote more time to their craft, which in turn brings new prestige. Such individuals quickly begin signing their work, which is done originally to insure that the author of the work is paid fairly, but quickly becomes a useful device as collectors seek the individualized style of certain indigenous artists. (Guaymí, Boruca)

New social groupings, labor divisions and forms of tutelage are formed related to the art form undergoing acculturation. In Villapalacios, for example, an informal association of Guaymí women meet regularly to prepare bark cloth and to paint. One of them will carry the work to the capitol city in order to sell it. They freely discuss what has sold and so alter their production accordingly. Younger women are taught how to gather the bark in the rain forest and others are made responsible for



Scheduled Public Presentations in Oregon:

Oregon International Council. I have been invited to speak to a gathering of the OIC in Portland during November.

An association of teachers of the McMinnville Public School District has asked me to speak to them about my research activity in October, 1996.

Scheduled Public Presentations Outside of Oregon:

I am curating an ethnographic collection at the Museo de Jade in San José, Costa Rica in October, 1996. I will be lecturing and presenting research video to the public.

I am to be a panelist for a symposium on contemporary art issues at USC in Los Angeles in January, 1997.

I am curating and lecturing about Guaymí bark cloth painting at Golden West College, Huntington Beach, CA.

I am curating an ethnographic collection at Museo Nacional in San José, Costa Rica in October, 1996. I will be lecturing and presenting research video to the public.

I am invited to submit a paper on this research activity for a conference on intercultural art in Ottawa, Canada. This conference is a follow-up to a conference on a similar topic I attended and presented a paper to in Mysore, India in Feb. 1996. I expect to present the paper in person.